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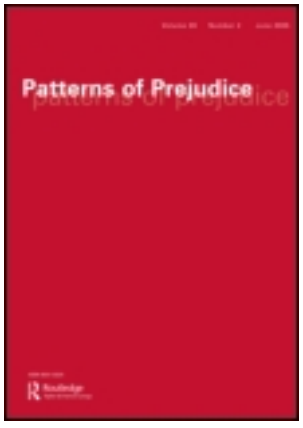

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Why Mussolini turned on the Jews

FRANKLIN HUGH ADLER

ABSTRACT Mussolini's abrupt turn towards antisemitism in October 1938 is conventionally explained by virtue of external factors, most importantly, as an aspect of Fascist Italy's strategic alliance with Nazi Germany. Adler explores a complementary hypothesis that accounts for racism in terms of factors *internal to the dynamics of Italian Fascism itself*, namely, a progressive radicalization of the regime during the 1930s aimed at the realization of a new imperial-totalitarian state, one that, in turn, would create a new homogeneous nation and indeed a New Man, a *uomo fascista*. Unlike Nazi racism, oriented backward towards the preservation of a given racial purity, Fascist racism categorically rejected Italians as they had been constituted historically. Instead, it was oriented towards a future project, an anthropological revolution that would create nothing less than a new race. Jews were seen as obstacles to this cultural transformation because they were historically bound to the decadent liberal state, as well as to the corrupting bourgeois spirit that informed it.

KEYWORDS antisemitism, Fascism, imperialism, Italy, liberalism, Mussolini, totalitarian

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During the autumn of 1938, an antisemitic campaign began in Fascist Italy in which Jews were attacked as an anti-national threat, and harsh discriminatory laws were instituted that, among other liabilities, prevented Jews from attending or teaching in public schools, working for the government, owning large-scale enterprises, publishing, and practising many professions. Until the summer of 1938, the government had denied anything of the sort was being considered or, for that matter, even the existence of a 'Jewish problem'. In fact, for the first sixteen years of its twenty-year reign, Fascist Italy had maintained a record that, by contemporary standards, could only be considered philosemitic. As with previous liberal governments, Jews held important posts in the government, military and industry. None of the formative principles or policies of Italian Fascism were in the least antisemitic. As with other Italians, among Jews there were both Fascists and anti-Fascists, and such affiliation was based on such non-religious factors as class, region and generation. Unlike Germany, France and Austria, Italy had been relatively free from antisemitism and the genesis of antisemitic movements and parties in the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, there was no Italian attempt at redeploying older antisemitic traditions as a contemporary basis for social mobilization. The state-sponsored

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antisemitism that emerged in 1938 was something altogether new, based less on preserving the past than helping realize some radically alternative future project: a new imperial Italian nation, a New Man, a *uomo fascista*.

How can this apparent break with the past be explained? Surprisingly, little scholarly attention has been focused specifically on this question, although it certainly has been touched upon in larger historical narratives concerning Italian Fascism and the Jews. The two classic studies, Renzo De Felice's *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* and Meir Michaelis's *Mussolini and the Jews*, the first published in 1961, the latter in 1978,[1] both agreed that this abrupt change in policy was due to external factors, namely, the consolidation of a strategic alliance with Nazi Germany. Both the scholarship and logic were impeccable in these volumes. How else could one make sense of this dramatic discontinuity in 1938, and not earlier, if indeed antisemitism were a consequence of prior Fascist development? If antisemitism were internal to Fascist development, and not a pragmatic accommodation to Germany, why would Mussolini earlier have appointed Jews to important posts, repeatedly praised Jewish contributions to Italian life, ridiculed Hitler's racist excesses, and made Italy a refuge or transit point for German Jews escaping persecution after 1934?

By the time De Felice returned to the topic in 1981, he had published three volumes of his monumental biography of Mussolini, and a whole new generation of scholarship on Italian Fascism had been produced. To the volume *Mussolini il duce: Lo Stato totalitario 1936–1940*,[2] De Felice brought new insights and approaches, as well as the accumulated expertise of his own focused scholarship on Fascism. Most importantly, De Felice focused attention on the differences between the Fascism of the 1920s, when opposition was eliminated and a new institutional order was being created, and the Fascism of the second half of the 1930s, captured best in the suggestive title of the 150-page first chapter, 'Il regime di fronte al proprio futuro: il ''totalitarismo'' fascista'. Here, the Fascist project was no longer simply eliminating opposition and obliterating the liberal distinction between the state and civil society, replacing the traditional liberal state with a consolidated authoritarian dictatorship. In the new totalitarian project, by way of contrast with 1920s Fascism, the state no longer was simply to contain or discipline society in its current form, but rather to create an entirely new society and transform Italians themselves.[3] Racial policy was

1 Renzo de Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi 1961); Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978).

2 Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, vol. 2, *Lo Stato totalitario 1936–1940* (Turin: Einaudi 1981).

3 Recent French historiography on Italian Fascism has embraced this periodization, seeing the late 1930s and the Second World War as witnessing a distinct 'radicalization of the regime'. See Pierre Milza, *Mussolini* (Paris: Fayard 1999), 718–57. See also Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci and Pierre Milza (eds), *L'Homme nouveau dans l'Europe fasciste* (Paris: Fayard 2004).

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an aspect of this development, and here Italian racism was significantly different than that of the Germans. Whereas the latter was essentially biological and sought to preserve the purity of the Aryan race, the former was primarily cultural or anthropological and sought to create a new one, eliminating the contentious race of servants and mandolin players, as well as the selfish bourgeoisie, replacing them with a fabricated, homogeneous society of imperial citizen–soldiers. Jews, as we shall see, were obstacles to this project in two respects. First, more than anyone else, they historically were most associated with the liberal state through which they had secured emancipation and conspicuous social mobility. Second, they were portrayed as the living incarnation of the 'bourgeois spirit', antithetical to all the imperial values that were to mark New Fascist Man.

While not renouncing the primacy of diplomatic imperatives to explain the abrupt change of 1938, De Felice now suggested that the ideological and organizational development of the Fascist regime had to be brought into the analysis as well. In the introduction to a new edition of his book on the Jews in Fascist Italy, De Felice pointed to his own initial limitations, as well as those of Michaelis who polemically negated the importance of any internal causation. For De Felice, Michaelis reduced the Jewish policy of the Fascist regime to 'a foreign policy event', ignoring

> every other aspect of Italian racial policy, resulting in blurring and obfuscating the deeper differences that exist between the attitude toward Jews during the liberal governments and the Fascist regime before the mid-1930s; the reality and inner workings of Fascism itself, and how these changed in time, as well as the repercussions that these changes had on the attitude toward Jews, and on the autonomous developmental process of a home-grown anti-Semitism on the part of Fascism in general, and by Mussolini in particular.[4]

As De Felice suggests, the foreign policy position and what I shall call the 'totalitarian transformation position'[5] need not be seen as alternatives, but rather as complementary approaches to understanding Fascist racial policy.

4 Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy. A History*, trans. from the Italian by Robert L. Miller and (notes and documents) Kim Englehart (New York: Enigma Books 2001), xxxvii. See Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*; Michaelis defends his earlier position in Meir Michaelis, 'Fascist policy toward Italian Jews', in Ivo Herzer (ed.), *The Italian Refuge* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America 1989), 34–72. For an excellent, recently published reflection on historiographical issues at play regarding Fascism and antisemitism, see Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e Antisemitismo in Italia* (Milan: Franco Angeli 2003).

5 This position should not be confused with the totalitarian approach developed after the Second World War by Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Hannah Arendt and others to compare Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. De Felice and Emilio Gentile make clear that they are referring only to Italy, and to what had been an articulated goal of the Fascist regime itself, not a general social science paradigm.

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Nevertheless, the totalitarian transformation position does have two advantages worth noting. First, it can give an account of why an imperialist foreign policy had been pursued by Italy in the first place, something Michaelis simply takes for granted. Before the Axis was consummated, Italy already had invaded Ethiopia, intervened in the Spanish Civil War and quit the League of Nations, independent of Germany's foreign policy goals that, at times (Austria in 1934), actually conflicted with those of Italy. Second, it addresses the ideological and institutional development of the Fascist regime, something also taken for granted in the foreign policy approach or simply treated as a given in 1938.

Accordingly, for purposes of this essay, I recognize the importance of the foreign policy position, but seek to explore the totalitarian transformation position as a more fruitful point of departure. Beyond De Felice's insights in this regard, fragmentary and developed incidentally in the course of a narrative, I would like to draw heavily on the contributions of Emilio Gentile who developed the totalitarian transformation position more fully in two books, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo* and *La Grande Italia*.[6] According to Gentile, the roots of the totalitarian transformation project are to be found during the decade of radical nationalism (1912–22), spanning Italy's war in Libya, the First World War, the post-war crisis and the Fascist March on Rome. Imperial expansion was a theme articulated most truculently by Enrico Corradini, who famously argued that Italy was a 'proletarian nation' in struggle against the plutocratic nations; moreover, what Italy lacked in financial resources was made up for by its demographic potential, more important in sustaining wars and conquering territory in the long run. The theme of the proletarian nation resurfaced during Fascism, especially during the second half of the 1930s, first, during the so-called social turn, *svolta sociale*, of 'going towards the people' and, most dramatically, in Mussolini's declaration of war, made in the name of 'L'Italia proletaria e fascista', a war on the part of poor people against those who monopolized the wealth of the world, a war of young and fecund people against sterile powers in decline. War, said the Futurists, close in sentiment, though politically distinct, was the hygiene of the world. Peace and pacifism were for the weak and cowardly. Another fundamental nationalist theme was total rejection of liberal corruption and decadence in favour of a new, authoritarian state that would promote national renewal, not just simply manage. This reflected a broader disaffiliation with the liberal state on the part of intellectuals across the political spectrum. Mazzini had conceived of the Risorgimento as national renewal, not just geographical unification. By way of contrast, the liberal state appeared weak, corrupt, removed from the 'real Italy' and unworthy of ruling. The Risorgimento as a missed revolution, or a *rivoluzione mancata*, an incomplete revolution, was reflected in the intellectual and literary journals of the period, particularly

6 Emilio Gentile, *Il mito dello Stato nuovo: dal radicalismo nazionale al fascismo*, revd edn (Rome: Laterza 1999); Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia* (Milan: Mandadori 1999).

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the most prestigious, *La Voce*, in which Mussolini occasionally published and certainly received whatever cultural education he had. I might add that during the Libyan war antisemitism first surfaced politically, although it was marginal and never became a topic around which political mobilization took place. Some nationalists attacked Zionism and the alleged dual loyalties of Italian Jews, though Zionism had a very limited following and was viewed as an expression of solidarity with persecuted Jews in Russia and elsewhere, not a personal commitment to leave Italy for Palestine, or a rejection of Italian identity, or especially a turning away from the fierce patriotism for the *madre patria* that had marked the Jewish community from the time of the Risorgimento. Besides Zionism, the theme of international Jewish finance and powerful Jewish bankers hostile to Italy surfaced as well. Both themes carried over into Fascism, even during the 1920s, although a distinction was always made between 'international Jewry' and international Jewish finance on the one hand, and Italian Jews on the other.

For the purposes of this essay, I shall not draw on all the themes that characterized totalitarian transformation, but will concentrate only on what De Felice called Mussolini's cultural revolution, and what Gentile designates instead as an anthropological one. What they have in common is the notion of a totalitarian state that makes a new society or, in this case, a Fascist Totalitarian State that fabricates a future Fascist society, a state that creates not only new institutions, but new national subjects, if not new men and a new race. Not addressed here directly is the problem of how totalitarian politics effectively depoliticized Italians who, generally speaking, opposed the racial campaign, the alliance with Germany, as well as the Second World War.[7] Though the racial campaign was unpopular and generated widespread empathy towards Jews (an embarrassing phenomenon the regime derisively called 'pietism'), there were no collective displays of opposition or solidarity with the Jewish community. Likewise, there were few heroic displays of civic courage regarding compulsory loyalty oaths, followed later by declarations of non-Jewish status for state employees, including university professors, or, for that matter, hesitation at replacing Jewish professors whose posts were vacated because of the racial legislation. Italians behaved differently once the Fascist regime collapsed and the Germans occupied Northern Italy. At that time, Italians were generous and courageous in saving tens of thousands of Italian and even foreign Jews who continued to enter Italy despite the racial legislation. Only 15 per cent of the Jewish population perished in the Holocaust, among the lowest number registered in countries occupied by the Germans. Unlike Eastern Europe, no Jews seeking help from partisan fighters were rejected, nor were they shot in the back, as happened to Leibl Fehlhandler, one of the leaders of the Sobibor

7 We know this from police reports, other documents and the diaries of Fascist leaders such as Galeazzo Ciano, Giuseppe Bottai and Dino Grandi.

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death camp revolt who escaped only to be killed by Polish partisans.[8] The Italian people were never antisemitic, nor were they mobilized by the state against the Jews, as had been the case in Germany and many of the occupied countries.[9] Yet, by 1938, the effects of totalitarian rule, and the uneasy consensus described so well by De Felice, had undercut the will to resist or oppose state policy, however badly Italians may have felt about the treatment of their Jewish colleagues, friends and neighbours.

The Italian Jewish community

At the time of the racial campaign of 1938, there were roughly 47,000 Jews in Italy, one-tenth of one per cent of the population, concentrated in a number

8 Paul Bookbinder, 'Italy in the context of the Holocaust', in Herzer (ed.), *The Italian Refuge*, 105.

9 My point here is necessarily *comparative*. To some degree or another, antisemitism existed in all Christian societies and nation–states. Looking at post-unification Italy, one is struck at how little it characterized or even penetrated society, culture and politics. In reaction to the popular post-war myth of Italians being 'good people' (*Italiani brava gente*), who never supported the regime's official antisemitism, some recent scholarship has clearly exaggerated Italian antisemitism, arguing that antisemitic themes were never absent from either high or popular culture. See Lynn M. Gunzberg, *Strangers at Home: Jews in the Italian Literary Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1992) and, far more one-sidedly, Wiley Feinstein, *The Civilization of the Holocaust in Italy* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 2005). This is hardly a revelation, as one would be hard pressed to find a western nation in which antisemitism was totally absent. The question must be *comparative*: to what extent was antisemitism representative or characteristic, and what impact did this have on society, culture and politics? In post-unification Italy, Jews had never become the objects of antisemitic social movements, nor had there been obstacles to their remarkable social mobility and professional success. Had Italian culture been antisemitic, as Gunzberg and Feinstein suggest, one would be hard pressed to explain either Jewish prominence before the 1938 racial legislation or the remarkable attempts at saving Jews from Nazi round-ups after Mussolini fell from power. More polemically, one might wonder how American Jewish scholars, without any apparent self-reflection, could call Italy antisemitic given the far more pervasive nature of antisemitism in the United States during the 1930s. Until the racial legislation of 1938, Italian Jews were never barred from professions, subject to quotas in universities or restricted in housing. Most ironically, at the very time Italian diplomats and military officers were saving Jews in occupied territories from falling into German hands, the United States Department of State was doing all it could to keep fleeing European Jews from entering the country. Breckinridge Long, Roosevelt's chief policymaker in matters concerning European refugees, a notorious antisemite, had no counterpart in the upper reaches of Italy's diplomatic corps. Gunzberg and Feinstein would have been well advised to consult David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–45* (New York: Pantheon 1984) before writing about antisemitism in Italy. The literature is voluminous on Italian efforts in saving Jews in southern France and Yugoslavia. One of the best recent studies is Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1944–43* (London: Routledge 2002).

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of cities such as Trieste, Livorno, Milan, Venice, Turin, Florence, Genoa and Ferrara. The wave of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe bypassed Italy; the only other parts of Europe with fewer Jews were Iberia and Scandinavia. The Jews in Italy spoke Italian, not Hebrew, Yiddish or Ladino, were fully integrated into Italian life and had the highest percentage of mixed marriages of any country in Europe, 30 per cent (compared, for example, with Germany's 11 per cent in 1934 or Hungary's 14 per cent in 1932).[10] Jews had lived in Italy from the time of Caesar, as Mussolini himself pointed out with approval in 1929, at the time of the Lateran Pact with the Vatican.

> The Jews have been in Rome ever since the time of the Kings; perhaps it was they who supplied clothes after the rape of the Sabine women. There were fifty thousand at the time of Augustus, and they asked to weep on the corpse of Julius Cesar. They will stay here undisturbed.[11]

Italian Jews experienced emancipation during the Risorgimento. As Arnaldo Momigliano and Antonio Gramsci separately noted, Jews became 'Italians' when the inhabitants of Milan, Florence, Turin and Genoa also became 'Italians', so much so that their participation in the Risorgimento was generous and conspicuous. The three fathers of modern Italy, Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi, were all philosemites. As Susan Zuccotti pointed out, two Jews became city councillors in Rome in 1870, as soon as the ghetto was dissolved; three Jews were elected to the first parliament of a nearly united Italy in 1861, nine served by 1870 and eleven by 1874. Ernesto Nathan became mayor of Rome in 1907, only thirty-seven years after the ghetto had been opened.[12] Michaelis is certainly right in claiming: 'As late as 1848, there was hardly a country in Europe where the restrictions placed upon the Jews were more galling; twenty-two years later there was no part of the world where religious freedom was more real, or religious prejudice so small.'[13]

Italy would have the first Jewish prime minister in Europe, Luigi Luzzatti, in 1910, twenty-six years before Léon Blum served in that capacity in France, as well as the first minister of war, Giuseppe Ottolenghi, who had been the first Jewish general in 1888. Fifty Jewish generals served in the First World War, including Emanuele Pugliese, who became the most highly decorated general in the Italian army. More than a thousand Jews won medals for valour. The nation's youngest gold medal winner, Roberto Sarfatti, was killed in combat at the age of seventeen, and the oldest medal winner was Giulio Blum.[14] On numerous occasions before 1938, Mussolini spoke of Jewish bravery during the war, which might seem altogether surprising as,

10 De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 7–11.
11 Quoted in Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, 53.
12 Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books 1987), 16–17.
13 Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, 3.
14 Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, 17–18.

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after the racial campaign began, Jews were portrayed as self-interested and cowardly, living incarnations of the detestable *spirito borghese*.

Jews rapidly rose to positions of importance in business, publishing and academia, largely due their superior literacy rate (in 1901 the illiteracy rate for all Italians was 49.9 per cent, while for Jews it was 5.7 per cent).[15] By 1930, 8 per cent of all university professors were Jews, as were two of Italy's finest novelists, Italo Svevo and Alberto Moravia.[16] In fact, by 1938 Jewish prominence in professional life, despite their small numbers, had become a significant topic of antisemitic journalism, as was the case elsewhere in Europe. On 5 August 1938, *Informazione Diplomatica* announced that the participation of Jews in the overall life of the state should be reduced to a ratio reflecting their proportion of the population:

> To discriminate does not mean to persecute. This must be said to the too many Jews in Italy and in other countries who cry useless lamentations to the heavens, passing with typical swiftness from intrusiveness and pride to demoralization and senseless panic. As was clearly stated and noted in no. 14 of *Informazione Diplomatica*, and as is repeated today, the Fascist government has no special plan to persecute the Jews themselves. It deals with another matter. There are 44,000 Jews in the metropolitan territory of Italy, according to Jewish statistical data, which must, though, be confirmed by a special census in the near future; the proportion therefore is supposedly one Jew for every thousand inhabitants. It is clear that, from now on, the participation of the Jews in the overall life of the State should be, and will be, adapted to such a ratio.[17]

Until 1938, however, Jewish participation in national life had never been an issue for the government, nor had membership in the Fascist movement and later the Fascist Party. At least five Jews were among the 119 who founded the Fascist movement in the Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan in March 1919; three died as Fascist 'martyrs' in violent conflicts before the March on Rome in which 200 Jews participated. Aldo Finzi was among the nine Jews elected to parliament in May 1921, and became undersecretary at the ministry of interior and a member of the Fascist Grand Council. Maurizio Rava was a vice-governor of Libya, governor of Somalia and a general in the Fascist militia. Ugo Foa, a captain in the First World War and winner of a silver metal for military valour, a lawyer and a Fascist Party member, served as a magistrate until he was forced into retirement. Giorgio Del Vecchio, an eminent professor of international law, became the first Fascist rector of the

15 Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista* (Turin: Einaudi 2000), 6.

16 Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, 18.

17 Quoted in De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 682–3. For the text of *Informazione Diplomatica*, no. 14, see Luigi Preti, *Impero fascista, africani ed ebrei* (Milan: Mursia 1968), 248–9.

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University of Rome in 1925.[18] Guido Jung was appointed minister of finance in 1932; Mussolini remarked to a close friend that a Jew was needed in the ministry of finance.[19]

Mussolini himself had never been an antisemite in the manner of Hitler; he had numerous Jewish associates, friends and even a celebrated Jewish lover, Margherita Sarfatti, who edited the art and literature page of Mussolini's newspaper *Popolo d'Italia*, co-edited the Fascist Party monthly *Gerarchia*, and wrote an authorized biography of the dictator.[20] When her young son, the war hero Roberto Sarfatti, was killed in combat at the age of seventeen, Mussolini himself wrote a moving commemoration in *Popolo d'Italia*.

> There is, in truth, something of the religious, of the poetic, and the profound in the sacrifice of these young men. The voice of their Fatherland must resound in their souls with accents and rhythms of which we know nothing . . . A boy who still has scarcely obtained a minimal acquaintance with life, who has not yet 'taken' anything from life, gives all: the present and the future, that which is and that which might have come to pass. This means that there must be in him that real will to renunciation which is the secret and privilege of a great love.[21]

As with other nationalists, Mussolini had been critical of Zionism, although he met with important Zionist leaders in an effort to check British influence in the Middle East. He even went so far in a 1934 meeting with Nahum Goldmann as to declare himself a Zionist, and promised to dissuade Chancellor Dollfus of Austria from constitutional changes that would restrict the rights of Jews.[22] In a 1932 conversation with Emil Ludwig, Mussolini said: 'Race! It is a feeling, not a reality; ninety-five per cent, at least, is a feeling. Nothing will ever make me believe that biologically pure races can be shown to exist today.' After attacking German antisemitism, Mussolini

18 Zucotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, 25–6.

19 De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 493.

20 Among Mussolini's many lovers, Margherita Sarfatti was not the only Jew. He had an affair with Angelica Balabanoff, and had fathered a child with another Russian Jew, Fernanda Ostrovski. Sarfatti, however, was regarded as the 'uncrowned queen of Italy' during the 1920s. She was a dominant force in Italian art and culture, whose salon was visited by the likes of Colette, George Bernard Shaw, Sinclair Lewis, Ezra Pound, André Gide, André Malraux and Josephine Baker. A personal friend of Filippo Marinetti and Arturo Toscanini, Sarfatti protected Italian culture during the 1920s from prominent Fascist thugs such as Roberto Farinacci, who wanted to replace 'Jewish' and 'internationalist' modernism with nationalist kitsch. Farinacci would become one of the most philo-Nazi of the Fascist notables during the 1930s, although he tried to protect his Jewish secretary Jole Foà from discrimination. For an incredibly rich and nuanced biography of Sarfatti, see Philip V. Canistraro and Brian R. Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman* (New York: William Morrow 1993).

21 Quoted in Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, 11.

22 A text of the meeting can be found in De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 636–46.

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said: 'Anti-Semitism does not exist in Italy ... The Italian Jews have always shown themselves good citizens, and they fought bravely in the war. They occupy leading positions in the universities, in the army, in the banks. Quite a few are generals.'[23] As late as 1937, roughly a year before the racial legislation was introduced, Mussolini told the visiting editor of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, Generoso Pope:

> You are authorized to point out that the Jews of Italy have received, are receiving, and shall continue to receive the same treatment as that awarded to any other Italian citizen, that no form of racial or religious discrimination is on my mind, and that I remain faithful to the policy of equality of the law and freedom of religion.[24]

After 1938, Mussolini privately ridiculed the idea of racial purity, conceding 'a little Jewish blood, in the end, never hurt anyone'. And he contemptuously described the Racial Manifesto as 'a conscientious German essay written into bad Italian'.[25]

Rather than a principled antisemite, Mussolini at heart was a cynical opportunist who used antisemitism instrumentally. Undoubtedly his relations with Jews soured during the 1930s; he broke off personal and professional relations with Margherita Sarfatti in 1932, and was vindictive towards Jewish anti-Fascists in Italy and abroad, though in fact there were far more Gentiles in this camp than Jews.[26] The regime's attack on Jews served two complementary ends: diplomatically, it helped overcome Italy's isolation and solidify the strategic alliance with Germany; internally, it served the purpose of helping fabricate the myth of New Fascist Man. Here, the imaginary Jew represented both an obstacle to and negation of the new Italy and the new Italians. This imaginary Jew was fatally linked to liberal Italy and to the bourgeoisie, both of which Mussolini viscerally detested; in fact, in the imaginary Jew these somewhat abstract phenomena became focused and concretized. For Mussolini, it was seldom the 'real Jew' that was at issue; rather it was this ideological projection (the 'imaginary Jew') that, in

23 Quoted in Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, 29.

24 Quoted in De Felice, *The Jews of Fascist Italy*, 183.

25 Quoted in Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge 2002), 73.

26 The first antisemitic attacks in the Fascist press, beyond the issue of Zionism, took place in March 1934, when sixteen members of the anti-Fascist group Giustizia e Libertà (fourteen of whom were Jews) were arrested at Ponte Tresa for subversive activities. The Fascist press spoke only of 'Jewish' anti-Fascists, leading to the creation by Jewish Fascists of the weekly journal *La Nostra Bandiera*. This incident is covered in all standard accounts of the period but, for an especially insightful journal article, see Joel Blatt, 'The battle of Turin, 1933–1936: Carlo Rosselli, Giustizia e Libertà, OVRA and the origins of Mussolini's anti-Semitic campaign', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, 22–57. Periodically thereafter, other antisemitic articles would appear in the Fascist press, though not on a consistent and sustained basis until after the official, government-sanctioned anti-Jewish campaign of 1938, which must be considered a threshold, qualitatively distinct from what had taken place earlier.

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the hands of his subordinates, and in the context of a totalitarian regime, took on a life of its own, removed, ironically, not only from ordinary Italian Jews but Italian public opinion as well.[27] For most Italians, despite the repetitive propaganda, Jews simply never constituted a credible threat.

Legitimation crisis, *svolta sociale* and New Fascist Man

During the 1920s, the Fascist regime was almost exclusively focused on eliminating sources of opposition and erecting an authoritarian institutional order that would take the place of the liberal order. Totalitarian aspirations had been kept in check by virtue of the compromises Mussolini chose to make with the traditional elites, particularly the industrialists, in order to secure their support.[28] These liberal elites, hoping to preserve as much of the

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27 This is apparent if one follows the iconography of Jews in the official organ of Fascist racism, *Difesa della Razza*. Virtually all photos and drawings of Jews, appallingly ugly and notoriously 'foreign' in appearance, are of non-Italian Jews, most often from Eastern Europe. Some of the photos come directly from the Nazi film, produced by Fritz Hippler, *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Je*w). The only issue in which photographs of Italian Jews appeared was that of 20 June 1942, in which Jews of Rome were photographed performing forced labour along the Tiber. Strangely, or so it must have seemed, none of these even remotely resembled the typical 'foreign Jews' that had always filled the pages of *Difesa della Razza*; in fact, they looked like typical Italians. Moreover, while *Difesa della Razza* routinely attacked prominent Jews in Germany, England, France and the United States (e.g. Hore Belisha, Walter Rathenau, Albert Einstein, Herbert Lehman, Fiorello La Guardia, Bernard Baruch, Sigmund Freud ... even John David Rockefeller, misidentified as the richest Jew in the world), never was an Italian Jew who had reached prominence during the twentieth century, before or after the rise of Fascism, similarly targeted.

28 On Mussolini's conflicts with the industrialists, see Franklin Hugh Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1995). Confindustria, the powerful industrial peak association, was led by a Jew, Gino Olivetti, whose 'Jewishness' made him a target of suspicion, sometimes direct attack, on the part of leading Fascists, often at odds with one another on other matters. Even a so-called 'moderate' like Bottai resented Olivetti's uncanny ability to outmanoeuvre Fascist syndicates, as well as advocates of corporatist reform, thus preserving until 1934 the altogether exceptional autonomy of industry. Bottai refers to him as 'the Jew Olivetti' in his diary. In February 1934 Mussolini forced the resignation of all heads of employer and employee associations, as a step, presumably, towards giving fresh impetus to the new corporatist structure. It had been rumoured that this was done largely to remove Olivetti, but in a way that did not appear as a direct attack upon Confindustria, or industry more generally. Abroad when the decree was announced, Olivetti was met upon his return by a colleague from Confindustria who told him: 'to subdue one Jew they have slain ten Christians' (quoted in Adler, *Italian Industrialists*, 434). Olivetti had also been attacked by Giovanni Preziosi, Fascism's leading and most notorious antisemite, as 'the living incarnation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Olivetti had been attacked as well for being a cryptic anti-Fascist by Fascist syndicalists and intransigents, themselves often at odds with 'moderates' like Bottai. Accordingly, one wonders whether Gino Olivetti, this shrewd Jew whom

status quo ante as they could, were under constant attack by intransigent Fascists, intent upon immediately establishing a new order. By the early 1930s, a dictatorship had been established, but without any apparent project that had been carried over from the previous decade. Not only had a dictatorship been established, but the traditional elites had been weakened, their autonomy further eroded by the coming of the Great Depression that made them ever more dependent on state assistance. Capitalism, if not industrial society itself, was in crisis, perhaps a terminal one. As Mussolini said, the crisis in the system had become a crisis of the system. In this situation, the old compromises with the liberal elite no longer obtained and, through the exigencies of autarky, Italy became more and more of a command economy. Moreover, during the 1920s, with the exception of the Corfu incident in September 1923, no significant initiatives had been undertaken regarding foreign policy. Mussolini had been fully aware of the constraints within which he had to operate, and made no expansionist or imperial claims. He had been eminently responsible during negotiations relating to the Locarno Pact, the Briand Plan and the Austro-German Customs Union, and was broadly praised for his diplomatic skills. By the middle of the 1930s, however, Mussolini had charted an imperial course with the invasion of Ethiopia, the consequent establishment of an empire and the stated aspiration to become the dominant Mediterranean power (the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum*). Ideological sustenance for this enterprise was drawn from the radical nationalist discourses that preceded the March on Rome; that is, Italy, a proletarian nation, would use demographic strength to assert itself over the plutocratic nations, demographically sterile and in a state of decline. More importantly, through this imperial initiative, Italy would be materially and spiritually rejuvenated, transformed into a modern emanation of ancient Rome. This totalitarian transformation indeed was the very project that had been unarticulated, suppressed or missing during the 1920s.

The conquest of Ethiopia, moreover, created the need for a racial policy, as now there was a large African colony under Italian control. Reports of sexual adventurism on the part of Italian soldiers and the prospect of mixed-race offspring led to the creation of an apartheid policy that institutionally separated the races and created stiff penalties for sexual relations between individuals of different races, penalties that fell exclusively on Italian transgressors. Although there was no direct relation between the situation of Ethiopian Blacks and Italian Jews, Luigi Preti, Enzo Collotti and others have argued that the new colonial conquest raised a racial sensitivity that had previously been largely absent, that a racial policy aimed at the colonial population became applicable as well to metropolitan Italy, that

diverse Fascists tended to despise, might not have been the very model of the 'bourgeois' Jew that was perceived as irreconcilable with the new order, and with New Fascist Man. Shortly after the racial laws were instituted in 1938, Gino Olivetti, along with other prominent Italian Jews, emigrated to Argentina.

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the racial policy adopted for Ethiopia lowered the threshold of discrimination against Italian Jews, and that racial policy towards Ethiopians, in effect, became a Trojan horse through which antisemitic racism would penetrate Italy.[29] Nevertheless, the conquest of Ethiopia enjoyed overwhelming popular support and undoubtedly marked the peak of Mussolini's popularity.

Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War, and the severe material hardships the Depression and autarkic policies had upon Italians, led to a legitimation crisis within three years. The syndicalist and corporatist reforms adopted with great fanfare in the late 1920s and early 1930s were, in the eyes of their very proponents, stillborn. The regime's bureaucratic involution drew criticism from all quarters, especially trade unions and youth organizations, both engaged in a new round of agitation, hostile towards capitalism and demanding a new, unified role for labour. Under these circumstances, Mussolini launched the so-called *anti-borghese* campaign, promising to deliver 'three punches to the belly of the bourgeoisie': adopting the *passo romano*, an Italian version of the goose-step that Mussolini insisted was Roman in origin; the anti-*lei* campaign against the use of the Italian pronoun that Mussolini said was not only archaic but anti-popular; and finally racial legislation against the Jews, principal bearers of the 'bourgeois spirit'. The clearest articulation of this *anti-borghese* stance is contained in a speech Mussolini delivered to the national council of the Fascist Party in October 1938, as the official racial campaign had just begun. Mussolini argued that 'the enemy of our regime has a name ''borghesia'''. The *borghesia* was not so much an economic category as a politico-moral one, pessimistic, self-interested and parasitic. The bourgeois spirit was an obstacle to further development; 'it must be isolated and destroyed.'[30] This was hardly an isolated outburst, as throughout the diaries of Giuseppe Bottai and Galeazzo Ciano there are numerous entries that record Mussolini's many extemporaneous fulminations against the bourgeoisie. Both diaries mention Mussolini saying that, had he a true understanding of what the bourgeoisie really signified when he was still a socialist, he would have led such a merciless revolution that, by comparison, the one led by 'Comrade Lenin' would seem like an innocent joke.[31]

Once Jews became conflated with the bourgeoisie,[32] attacks against the latter became transformed rhetorically into attacks against the former. What followed was a discursive game in which hostility towards capitalism and

29 Preti, *Impero fascista*; Enzo Collotti, *Il Fascismo e gli ebrei* (Bari: Laterza 2003).

30 The text is reproduced in Preti, *Impero fascista*, 285–96.

31 Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935–44* (Milan: BUR 2001), 237; Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937–43* (Milan: BUR 2000), 486.

32 The 'bourgeois-Jewish' identity became a staple of Fascist propaganda after 1938, even in *Difesa della Razza*, which tended to emphasize biological aspects of racism. For

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towards capitalists became displaced on to the Jews and their sympathizers, the 'pietists'. According to De Felice, during November 1938 not a single newspaper refrained from attacking pietism, so much so that for weeks it almost seemed that the struggle against the Jews had become secondary to the one directed against those who were pro-Jewish, the so-called *filogiudei* and 'moral mongrels'. For members of the Fascist left, and particularly labour leaders, this was the only way to extend the *anti-borghese* campaign beyond Jews to the bourgeois class itself. This was readily apparent in an article the labour leader Luigi Fontanelli wrote in *Il lavoro fascista* of 4 September 1938 in which he asserts: 'Justly it has been written that no less dangerous than the Jews are the friends of the Jews.' In a thinly veiled attack against the broader bourgeoisie, not just the Jews, Fontanelli sought, as he put it, to 'fill in the gray areas':

> The race problem, and particularly the resulting, indispensable anti-Semitic attitude of Fascism, is an excellent reactive agent to isolate not only the Jews but all those gray areas where—under the cover of the most 'petit bourgeois spirit'—those representatives of the old ruling classes were hiding, whose motto could be: 'I have changed my badge because it was convenient, nothing else.' It is very well, therefore, that through the problem of race, revolutionary Fascism doubles its uncompromising vigilance over those elements that nurture the most deleterious and corrosive individualistic spirit, which is anti-Fascist . . . The circles that show little sensitivity toward the race problem will identify closely with those who are insensitive to the collective spirit imposed by a superior civilization, who do not believe in corporatism, reducing it to system thought up to avoid or delay the solution of the biggest social problems of our times . . . The revolution gives no pause to these elements and gray areas representing the vestiges of that extremely ingrained mentality of the old conceited, empty, intellectualistic, and underhanded Italy that was useful to everyone and didn't scare anyone . . . Now they will find out that it wasn't just a flash of lightning: it's raining and it will continue to rain.[33]

Unlike Hitler, Mussolini had no intention of creating ghettos, organizing pogroms or exterminating the Jews. It appears that he expected to expel them quietly from Italy, at a rate of ten per day. This plan was shelved due to Italy's entrance into the war, but no obstacles were placed on Jewish

example, see 'La Borghesia' (5 August 1938), 'Gli Ebrei e la morale borghese' (20 October 1938) and 'Formazione neogiudaica della borghesia' (20 August 1939). Jews, as Jews and as bourgeois, were attacked as cowards, lacking the courage of 'Romans', despite the fact that historically the record of Jewish military service had been exemplary, a point that Mussolini himself had earlier made. The hero and model for young Fascists, Roberto Sarfatti, was forgotten. See 'Giudeo e soldato: un'antisesi', *Difesa della Razza*, 5 November 1939.

33 Quoted in De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 381–2; De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: Lo Stato totalitario*, 260–51.

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emigration, and Jews were offered currency transactions at a higher rate than the official one.[34] Only 6,000 Jews left; the others endured another three years of discrimination under Fascism, and then the Holocaust came to Italy with the collapse of Mussolini's regime and German occupation of the North in September 1943.

Removing Jews from public life, in and of itself, did not point towards transformation, it only removed an obstacle to the fabricated homogeneity Mussolini had in mind. As De Felice notes, Mussolini's real 'obsession' was with the Italians. Out of a 'race of slaves' he wanted to create a 'race of lords'. Speaking to Ciano, Mussolini said: 'The revolution must now effect the habits of Italians. They must learn to be less ''friendly,'' to become hard, implacable, odious. In other words: masters.'[35] Privately, as opposed to his public pronouncements, Mussolini had a low opinion of Italians, an opinion that became even more negative when it became clear that they showed little inclination for becoming hard, imperious and instinctually bellicose. Italy remained a 'gesticulating, chattering, superficial, carnivalesque country'.[36] One day, visiting Naples, Mussolini told Bottai that it was necessary to launch a march on the city and sweep away all the guitarists, mandolin players, violinists and balladeers.[37] When Naples was heavily bombed in July 1941, he told Ciano: 'I'm delighted that Naples had such severe nights. The race will become harder. The war will turn them into a Nordic people.'[38] Later, he would remark that the Italians were showing themselves to be 'hardly worthy of Italy, or, certainly, of my Italy'.[39] Already in January 1940 he had asked Ciano: 'Have you ever seen a rabbit become a wolf? The Italian race is a race of sheep. Eighteen years is not enough to transform it. This will need a hundred and eighty years, or perhaps a hundred and eighty centuries.'[40] By June Mussolini would complain to Ciano: 'It's the material that is lacking. Even Michelangelo had need of marble to make his statues. If he had only clay he would have been simply a model maker.'[41]

In this essay, I have attempted to open a new line of enquiry regarding the abrupt antisemitic turn of October 1938. Against the conventional view, which reduces Mussolini's attack on the Jews to external exigencies, specifically, to a consolidation of Italy's strategic alliance with Germany, I have advanced a complementary thesis, based on the internal development of Italian Fascism itself during its totalitarian phase, a process that began well before the Italian-German alliance. Much work remains to be done, in this regard, entailing not only a focused analysis of the 1938 antisemitic

34 De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, 241.
35 Ibid., 242.
36 Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*, 53.
37 Bottai, *Diario 1935–44*, 115.
38 Ibid., 533.
39 Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 176.
40 Ciano, *Diario 1937–43*, 391.
41 Ibid., 444–5.

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campaign, its genesis and subsequent development, but also, necessarily, further refection on the larger question of antisemitism and Italian Fascism.

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